

**To stay or to leave? – The phenomenon of runaway, as a form of criticism against the child protection system**

**Introduction**

23 thousand children and young adults are cared by the Hungarian child protection system, and the running away of children and underaged youths from placement is an increasingly serious issue. The aim of our study is to examine the motivations for running away among children and young people in child care, and to map the related prevention and management practices of the institutions. First we present a few international researches and good practices relevant in this field, then we outline the main results of our research based on a qualitative methodology. We also highlight the views of children and professionals regarding runaway, and the solutions these views might point to in order to tackle the issue and the underlying motivations. Our results, through the identification of the phenomenon of runaway and the analysis of the underlying motivations, reveal certain acute shortages of the system. Our conclusion is that at present there are no real institutional solutions to prevent and manage runaway, and beyond running away, there is a substantial need to adequately approach, care for, and educate the target group, and on long term to support their successful social integration. The most needed change is to ameliorate the relationships between the youths living together, to support the relationship with the family, but also to create a more flexible regulation regarding how they can keep the contact; and to make institutions more open by making use of other services of the wider social system. Children perceive that the child protection system has no proper means regarding their upbringing; this perception is based on the fact that they cannot establish a trustful relationship with the educators and caregivers, which would ensure a solid ground to providing help related to runaway or all sorts of individual problems, needs or life events. There isn't any helpful

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professional in the children's environment they could rely on, they could trust, and other types of supportive background is also lacking, like psychologists. Institutional life is desolate both in terms of material and professional conditions, therefore troubled, rebellious teenagers do not find reasons for staying in the homes. Yet, dangers of the outside world and their consequences are often invisible and unpredictable, but responsibility relies on the child protection system, which, at present, does not have preventive and problem-centred, therapeutic solutions either.

### **International research and good practices regarding runaway**

According to a relevant research in the field<sup>4</sup> carried out on the basis of a web survey and interviews with children and young people (the survey was conducted among 117 children in 55 children's homes, mean age 15, the youngest was 8, the oldest 18 years old), the view on children's homes and the attitude of the staff working there are the most important factors in preventing runaway from the children's homes. In addition, the young people mentioned the facilities available in homes and the possibilities to have leisure activities. As regarding the negative aspects of living in a children's home, they mentioned missing their family, the difficulty to adapt to rules and restraints and to endure the noise typical for institutions, the compulsory cohabitation with other children and the problems it entails. Besides this, the children also mentioned the lack of pets as well. For their well-being it is very important to place them not far from their family, and the institution needs to be easily accessible, both from school and regarding leisure activities. It is an important observation of the participants to the research that living in a children's home means more rules and procedures, they need to learn to live together with other people who are not their family, while different children have different habits.<sup>5</sup> According to international experiences, episodes of running away from children's homes usually last for a short time, maximum one week; the oldest the youngsters are, the more frequent and longer the episode is, and girls tend to escape more frequently. There is no difference in the tendency to run away on the basis of the ethnical background. Youths running away usually have problems at school, have suicidal thoughts, have several, documented behavioural problems, struggle with addictions, and typically have mental

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<sup>4</sup> OFSTED, *Life in children's homes - A report of children's experience*. Children's Rights Director for England, London 2009 <[https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/182/7/Life%20in%20children's%20homes\\_Redacted.pdf](https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/182/7/Life%20in%20children's%20homes_Redacted.pdf)> (01.30.2020)

<sup>5</sup> Ivi

problems as well.<sup>6</sup> Research finds links between the frequency of runaways and the alterations of placements. The more places a youngster is living in, the more frequent is the runaway. Data show that children removed from their family due to neglect run away more frequently. Those children who were placed in homes due to abuse, tend to run away at a lower rate than other children. This aspect can be attributed also to the fact that escaping children most frequently return to their old, home environment.<sup>7</sup> Within a research led by the University of Chicago a twenty-years period was examined, between 1993 and 2003. Data were available on 14,000 cases of runaway, and 42 interviews were conducted with caregivers and foster parents. According to research data, the vast majority of children who run away were aged above 12, and most of them were girls. Running away was more frequent among those children and youngsters, who had addiction issues or mental illness, who experienced placement instability and changed institutions many times. The likelihood of running away was higher in case of children separated from their siblings. The interviews with the youngsters revealed that most of them did not run away from something, but for something, like independence, family ties, romantic relationships, or greater autonomy.<sup>8</sup>

The first experiences within an institution are decisive regarding the likelihood of running away. Young people running away recurrently typically will have difficulties in establishing bonds with others in their adult life or even unable to establish relationships, they will often commit crimes and join gangs. The emergence of addictions, the lack of educational qualifications and professional knowledge are also among the consequences of this phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> While on the run, children and youths more often fall victims of crimes, especially of sexual abuse, but in order to survive, they might become the actors of crimes themselves. The likelihood to HIV infection is fifteen times higher than in the case of their peers who do not run away. It is a typical experience that while on the run, they are mugged, beaten and stolen off. They also commit crimes in such situations.<sup>10</sup> Pimps and procurers have a preference in recruiting youths

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<sup>6</sup> M.R. PERGAMIT, M. ERNST, *Running Away from Foster Care: Youths' Knowledge and Access of Services* 2011 <<https://monarchhousing.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/runawayyouth.pdf>> (01.30.2020)

<sup>7</sup> Ivi

<sup>8</sup> M. E. COURTNEY, A. SKYLES, G. MIRANDA, A. ZINN, A., E. HOWARD, R.M. GOERGE, *Youth Who Run Away from Out-of-Home Care. Chapin Hall Center for Children: Issue Brief* 103, 2005 March <[https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Courtney\\_Youth-Who-Run-Away\\_Brief\\_2005.pdf](https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Courtney_Youth-Who-Run-Away_Brief_2005.pdf)> (01.30.2020)

<sup>9</sup> K. CROSLAND, G. DUNLAP, *Running Away from Foster Care: What Do We Know and What Do We Do?* *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 2014, 6, pp. 1697-1706.

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, pp. 3

from children's homes, offering accommodation, food, money and drugs for youths on the run, respectively for who are considering making that step. The illusion that these people and gangs would ensure the missed family love and security, in fact exposes these youngsters to the dangers of human trafficking and prostitution.<sup>11</sup>

Multiple programs and prevention methods are available to tackle the running away, which can be adapted and adjusted to the Hungarian child protection system. Just to mention a few examples, the Family and Youth Services Bureau is a transnational organisation based in the USA, which aims at providing support to homeless youngsters exposed to different risks. One of the goals of this organisations is to decrease and prevent running away. It carries out field work, operates shelters and a webpage, which is dedicated specifically to runaway and the prevention of runaway.<sup>12</sup>

According to an American prevention method developed in 2012, the most important component in preventing runaway is a team of professionals with adequate training and attitude. The timetable of children has to be flexible and adjusted to the children's needs, in the sense that the caregivers have to be available to the children whenever they need them. A key factor in preventing runaway is the enhancement of the communication between foster parents, educators and the affected youth, and of their conflict management abilities. Upon recognizing these, a webpage and hotline functional across the states were created, providing support for youths on the run wherever they are. A distinct interface is dedicated to parents and educators, who can address their questions to professionals, and can receive help and guidance in the arising problems and dilemmas.<sup>13</sup>

When considering the reasons behind runaway, the prevention of legal and illegal drug prevention has an outstanding role and significance as well. Drug prevention has to be embedded in the series of activities related to health, mental health, and children wellbeing in general within an institution. Regarding the school environment, learning and teaching have to be interactive and the teacher-student relationship should not be defined by hierarchy,

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<sup>11</sup> Ivi and UNICEF, *A child is a child Protecting children on the move from violence, abuse and exploitation*, New York 2017 <[https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF\\_A\\_child\\_is\\_a\\_child\\_May\\_2017\\_EN.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF_A_child_is_a_child_May_2017_EN.pdf)> (01.30.2020)

<sup>12</sup> <<https://www.rhyttac.net/>> (01.30.2020)

<sup>13</sup> <[www.1800runaway.org](http://www.1800runaway.org)> (01.30.2020)

especially in situations where decision has to be made regarding the community. Pedagogical models built on cooperation and partnership facilitate the application and acceptance of the required preventive mentality and the methods to be applied.<sup>14</sup>

All this shows that the most important component in preventing runaway is the improvement of the institutional system and the professional development of the staff. Professionals with proper skills are able to create a trustful environment, where children can turn to them with trust, and feel safe. Supporting the educational path, addressing eventual behavioural and mental issues, providing help in case of learning difficulties and processing traumas, coupled with the appropriate prevention methods contribute to the decision of children and youths regularly running away or exposed to the risk of runaway to choose other solutions to their problems – however, all this requires a dedicated child protection system.

## **The examination of reasons and motivations of runaway in Hungary**

### *Overview*

According to 2017 data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 20,948 children aged 0-18 lived in child protection care. Just over half of the children were aged 11-17. The rate of sexes is almost identical. 37% of the children, a number of 7,793 were considered as having particular needs (children with a chronic disease, with disabilities, and aged 0-3). A little more than 2% of the cared children, 449 individuals were considered as having special needs, this group including children with addiction, showing symptoms of mental illness or with behavioural problems. The older a child is, the less the chances that they can be placed in foster care, as only 42% of children aged 14-17 live in foster care, while this percentage is 67% if we consider all the age groups. Almost all the children with special needs live in children's homes or closed or semi-closed institutions specialized for such children, and only 3.6% of children with such issues were placed in foster care.

In 2017 the number of children involved in runaway issues was 3,475, 48% of them being girls. Most of them ran away from children's homes and family-type care homes. Regarding the

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<sup>14</sup> UNITED NATIONS *School based education for drug abuse prevencios*, New York 2004  
<[https://www.unodc.org/pdf/youthnet/handbook\\_school\\_english.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/pdf/youthnet/handbook_school_english.pdf)> (01.30.2020)

county distribution, Budapest was on top of the list, the second being Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county, where the percentage of children in state care is very high, moreover, it is in the less developed part of the country. The number of runaway cases was 19,126, while the number of runaways per children was very high, 5.5. From the children who ran away, 5% committed crimes, one quarter of them being girls. When considering the tendencies of recent years, the number of children running away slightly decreased, but the frequency of runaway incidents transformed substantially. The number of children running away only once decreased, while the number of children running away two or three times is increasing; the number of children running away four or more times also slightly decreased. It is a reason for concern that while on the run, more and more children commit crimes with an increasing frequency. The committed crimes are related to material damage, the second most frequent infringement is drug abuse.<sup>15</sup>

Table no 1. The number of runaways in 2017

	Children's homes	Foster care
<b>1</b>	953	81
<b>2 times</b>	485	25
<b>3 times</b>	345	11
<b>4 and more times</b>	1,541	34
<b>Total number of children running away</b>	3,324	151
<b>Runaway cases</b>	18,812	314

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2017

### *The qualitative research*

As part of the qualitative research, we conducted interviews with 10 professionals. The range of professionals included foster parents, legal guardians, an institution manager, psychologist, professionals involved in decision-making at ministry level. Moreover, interviews were conducted with 20 affected persons, sixteen children and four young adults, who at present live in state care. We talked to eleven girls and nine boys; the interviewees were aged 12-19. The interviews were conducted in the capital and in other parts of the country. We were interested in finding out what the reasons and motivations for running away are, how institutions react,

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<sup>15</sup> KSH 2017 (Statistical data collection, unpublished data)

what measures exist following running away, if there are any institutional efforts to prevent runaway and repeated runaway. In what follows we will present the standpoint of professionals, then we examine reasons and motivations prompting runaway from the perspective of the youngsters. Finally, we outline the identifiable institutional reactions, revealing the insufficiencies in this field as well.

### *Main results*

#### ***The reasons and motivations of runaway according to professionals***

Compared to professionals working outside children's homes and to decision-makers, people working in homes have a very different view on the motivations behind running away. Those working within the facilities do not perceive such a significant institutional effect, and do not attribute so many negative features to the institution in relation with the runaway, as those professionals, who are connected to the system as external actors, like child protection guardians. The employees working in children's homes explain the issue rather through the life situations of children, and do not perceive any organisational or structural deficiency, displaying a rather repelling attitude. They state firmly that institutional rules are acceptable to children, and they do not run away because of the exaggerated expectations and rigid institutional setup. They are convinced that youngsters feel at ease in the homes. A further typical form of shifting institutional responsibility is the reference to behaviour patterns linked to age specificities. Boys are associated with the phenomenon of ganging up, while girls, but boys too with the effect of romance. *"That's what's usually happening, boys are hanging around with their gangs, fall in love, just as girls do, and since peer relationships are above everything else, if they don't have pass, they leave without one. I think it's that simple."* (educator responsible for teenagers, countryside)

Professionals working outside the institution display more criticism, as in their view, the main reason of runaways is that children's homes do not establish genuine partnership relations with the youths. The effects of socialization hardly allow the adaptation to strict rules, pointing to the rigidity of the system of outings, which disregards age specificities.

*"(...) the children's home is unable to keep them, they can't build up a partnership with them. (...) children have difficulties to bear the limits, and are used to different limits."* (child protection guardian, Budapest)

It is extremely important to talk about the dangers as well, like sexual abuse, which, due to the need for emotional attachment, is a real threat. *"Because they don't feel at ease inside, they*

*have no one to attach to, and that's how many kids put it, so what, it's better for me, because there, at least they love me. They have an emotional connection there, they feel loved, that's all, that's the price of it. They would buy me this or that, but then, some of them are used physically, so are forced to work."* (child protection guardian, Budapest) At this point, the risk of prostitution and the abuse of illegal and legal substances is very high, the latter being a problem anyway in child protection.

Among the anomalies of institutional functioning, the phenomenon of institutional neglect was also mentioned: the professionals often do not have accurate information on the cared children, they do not know what the youngsters are doing in their free time, where they go, what they are interested in, what their wishes regarding the near or more distant future are, or in general, how they feel. They often do not know their family and peer relationships either. *"They simply do not know much about the children living there. The educators do not spend time with the children, but stay in the educators' room, doors closed, they are afraid of children or what, I don't know. That kid is a good kid, who's just a number, but who's not at sight, so one doesn't need to be looked after."* (child protection guardian, Budapest)

The professionals describe as a structural problem the fact that there aren't adequate recommendations at place as how to care efficiently for preteenagers and teenagers, what should be the basic principles the upbringing relies on, especially that in their case, chances are few that they would be placed in foster care. *"So I think that tweens with many problems are in such a vacuum of care, to which there aren't adequate answers at present, in the care for preadolescents, to how a children's home should be operated."* (manager of an institution, Budapest)

### ***Runaway from the perspective of children and youths in child protection care***

We can conclude that most children and young adults run away to their family of origin. In most cases, they do not return to the institution when the allowed pass is over, only days or weeks later, but stay with their family and parents instead. It is evident that the fact that there isn't a proper procedure at place to keep the contact with their family, and the distance from their parents and familiar environment increase the risk of runaway, and the length and frequency of such incidence. Going to their families is often only the starting point of a series of runaways, as later on children tend to run not only to their family, but to friends and acquaintances too, because they do not want to return to the children's home. *"When I ran away for the first time, it was sometime in November, I went to my parents with my older sister. And*



*I stayed there for one day, then I returned. Now they let me go to my friend for one day. Everything was fine there, but that one day passed and we were heading to the bus station to return to D. (the town), then here (to the institution), and we were chatting, all that, and I was with my sister and with my friend, and they convinced me to stay.” (countryside, child living in a children’s home)*

Beyond this, we can observe another, rather standard pattern too, when running away is triggered by the desire to join dangerous company, or to be free and get rid of rules and limitations, and by the intensifying need for drugs. These situations are even more dangerous, since in such cases, the children do not go to their families, but spend time on the streets, in abandoned buildings or playgrounds, without the supervision or help of an adult. *“We always found such a place, for example there was in Ny (a place where the interviewee previously lived in an institution), at a railway station a warehouse-like building, a very old warehouse, and so, we were either there, or were sleeping in a train. We did the same in the daytime, things like that.” (Budapest, young adult living a post-care home)*

In such situations, the risk of becoming a victim, or being exposed to health threatening situations is very high. In such cases, illegal drug abuse or the consumption of legal substances occurs in all cases and is a decisive factor. *“We got to know each other better with these other kids from homes, they were also on drugs, they were smoking too so to say, like me and my little brother, the older one. So then, as we were smoking weed, there was a circle, people who were smoking weed, they had been doing this before us, and so we got into it too.” (Budapest, young adult living a post-care home)*

### ***Institutional responses and their perception***

According to the scant accounts of professionals and the experiences of the youngsters, the professional child protection system does not dispose over proper institutional tools and methods to prevent runaways, and there are no meaningful reactions to such acts, after the children return to the institution voluntarily, with their parents or escorted by the police. There is no trustful relationship between the cared children and the caregivers, which would allow for the sharing of secrets and experiences they had gone through. This is problematic in those cases too when a child runs away to their family, since there was a reason for being removed from their family, but it is even more risky if they hang around on the street or at acquaintances during their unpermitted leave. *“Well, I usually don’t talk to anyone when I come back. Didn’t*

you talk with the caregivers about whether there would be a next case, or why you had left? No.” (countryside, child living in a family-like home operated by the church *“The caregiver asks me where I’d been, and we write a note.”* (Budapest, young adult, sent to a correctional institution with a history in the child protection system 1)

*What is needed in order to prevent runaway or its repeating? The children and young adults mention three factors:*

1) It is important to experience confidence, affection, to have an adult caregiver or professional in any other position to whom they can turn to openly, who gives advice, is present in their lives, cares for them, who finds them important, and they can count on in times of hardship. *“Well, first of all I would, the love at first place. Lots of love, then, I don’t know. At that time drugs guided me, and the lack of love, this, you know, well, since we weren’t locked in, you know, we could go everywhere we wanted, in turn, it’s even worse if someone is locked up out there, ‘cause they would commit even more crimes.”* (Budapest, young adult sent to a correctional institution with a history in the child protection system 1)

2) At this age, exaggerated and rigid rules and expectations also evoke serious reluctance from the part of the youth, especially if the limits, rules and expectations were very different back home.

3) An important factor is the desolation of institutions, boredom, the fact that there aren’t exciting programs, and the available options are very limited. Among boys, internet, TV, computer, computer games are important and widespread, but besides these, sports, outdoor activities and extra-institutional programs are also indicated as needs. In case of girls, the lack of technical equipment is less emphasized, they would rather prefer outings. *“Well, if only we had more programs, that would be good.”* (Budapest, young adult, sent to correctional institution, with a history in the child protection system 2)

## **Conclusion**

The interview-based research revealed that, similarly to international trends, it is typical to the phenomenon of runaway that children and youth tend to run away more and more frequently and for more and more extended periods. In most cases, they go to their family of origin, the eventuality of it being evidently higher if a child lives in state care for a shorter period of time, and has a closer relationship with the family. It can be observed that first children run away to

their family, later, when runaway becomes part of their strategies, they run not only home, but to other places too. Thus, the risks they become exposed to are increasingly high and serious.

The child protection system has no means to address the issue. There isn't a relationship of trust between the caregivers and the cared children, which would ensure a solid ground for supportive discussions related to runaway, while sessions with a psychologist are not frequent enough, if they are accessible at all, in order to become efficient factors of change. Another important aspect is that in the narrative of the children and youngsters, boredom within the institutions, the lack of programs and activities are indicated as typical reasons leading to runaway.

*Runaway is a symptom, revealing the anomalies of the system. In order to prevent the phenomenon, and in general, to make child protection care efficient, the following are needed:*

- ***Increased efforts are needed in order to ensure that the contact between the biological family and the child is continuous and maintained;*** this relationship might be reconsidered due to changing needs, especially with the advancement of age.
- ***Enforcing the relationship of confidence between the cared children and the professionals:*** there isn't any helping professional in the environment of the children, on whom they could rely on, in whom they could trust. For any efficient intervention from the part of the specialised care regarding both runaway, and other factors threatening children (i.e. drugs, alcohol, committing crimes, prostitution), a stronger and deeper relationship between the carer and the cared is indispensable.
- ***There aren't therapeutic alternatives to process traumas experienced in the biological family or within the institutions.*** At present the institutional system is unable to fulfil all tasks related to child protection. It is evident that a considerably high rate of the children running away are affected by various deviancies, many of them are under pharmacological therapy, therefore during any unpermitted leave, the extent of the danger is also much higher.
- ***Insufficiencies in professional knowledge*** also show that professional knowledge is not adjusted to the life conditions of the cared children, and there isn't any openness to look for simple solutions on institutional level.
- ***Institutions organize targeted programs aimed at prevention only occasionally.*** They don't even consider it necessary, arguing that the type of problem already arose within the institution. Reactive solutions are also adventitious in all topics, besides runaway, we can mention in this respect victimization, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy as well.

According to professionals, the most important need is to organize group activities for the young people, and to improve relationships among youths living in the same homes, however, the tools for such actions remain unknown.

- Professional failures, the feelings of powerlessness and incapacity, and the concrete cases of runaway also have a negative impact on the attitude of professionals. ***It is important to dedicate attention to the improvement of the human relationships of professionals working with youths, to the life stories of children in child protection care or to the processing of feelings of failure caused by runaway***, in general, to allow space for professional dialogue (professional discussions, supervision and coaching).